



Veeran, E. V. (2019). Layered wanderings: epistemic justice through the art of Wangechi Mutu and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21(3), 488-498.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1619468>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/14616742.2019.1619468](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1619468)

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INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST JOURNAL OF POLITICS 2019, VOL. 21, NO. 3, 488–498.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1619468>

CONVERSATIONS

Layered wanderings: epistemic justice through the art of Wangechi Mutu and Njideka Akunyili Crosby

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KEYWORDS: Art; collage; epistemic justice; wandering; queer theory

Introduction

As visual artists who describe themselves as straddling multiple cultures and continents, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Wangechi Mutu are internationally known for their innovative mixed-media works that combine found imagery and objects, painting, and fabric to create compelling works of art. Their works, however, are also complex social and political histories and commentaries on gender, race, sexuality, colonialism, war, consumption, migration, memory, and visual culture. Often working with collage and bringing together different visual languages – from Renaissance portraiture and pop art to scientific illustration and photography – these two artists have developed new and distinct visual styles in order to offer critiques of gendered, raced, and sexed structures of power that operate across the international.

Inspired by the work of Akunyili Crosby and Mutu, I wish therefore to offer a new direction to explore how art, especially art otherwise (mis)classified as of the “peripheries” – whether gendered, raced, or queered ones – challenges these labels, their boundaries, and most importantly their epistemologies; how art as a meaning-making set of practices works to overcome historical and on-going cultures of violence. In developing my own practice and thinking, the art of Mutu and Akunyili Crosby, the visual languages, and especially the collage-based techniques they employ offer insight into strategies for creative approaches to counteracting and dismantling epistemic violence beyond (re)presenting it. In other words, through their work I can see ways in which international politics can turn to more varied and more interesting sites and practices of art in order not only to understand the margins and new spaces where power is (under)represented (Enloe 1996; Manchanda 2001; Ackerly and True 2006), but also to generate and circulate alternative ways of knowing through creative practices. As these artists demonstrate, art as a practice not only makes the international through the subjects it reproduces, but can share a queer epistemology that is important for understanding and studying international politics. Building on this claim and on a growing body of work on the politics of art within disciplinary international relations/world politics (Brocklehurst 1999; Sylvester 2005, 2015; Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Danchev and Lisle 2009; Moore and Shepherd 2010), particularly in relation to collage (Sylvester 2005; Zalewski et al. 2009; Särämä 2015; Kangas et al. 2018), I would like to call for the need to think through the ethics of “wanderings” (wonderings) and the power of “layerings” as part of queer epistemologies and their figurations, including thinking through what it means to reconfigure art along the decolonial lines that Mutu and Akunyili Crosby suggest.



Image 1. Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *The Beautiful Ones*, 2013. Acrylic, transfers, colored pencil, collage, and fabric on paper. Two panels: each 2.13 × 2.74 m. Installation view at the National Portrait Gallery. Photo credit: author, 2018.

Creating new figures

My introduction to the work of Akunyili Crosby and Mutu began with a wander and wonder: through an unplanned visit to London's National Portrait Gallery and Akunyili Crosby's newest additions to her series of portraits *The Beautiful Ones* (Image 1). Once home, I wandered through the online archive of her work, interviews, and inspirations, searching for collage-based portraiture, leading me to the work of Wangechi Mutu (Image 2). Over the course of this exploration, I was struck by the multi-layeredness of the work of Mutu and Akunyili Crosby and therefore their politics. On first reading, their works deal directly with the under-representation of positive (female) black subjects within visual cultures, including spaces such as the National Portrait Gallery. For Mutu in particular, this absence (or more accurately epistemic erasure) is too often filled instead with stereotypical exoticized and eroticized images of black women as reproduced and widely circulated in historical medical literatures, art, pornography, fashion magazines, and popular culture. For these artists, there is a continuum between these selective erasures and the direct violence associated with colonialism, war, sexualized violence, plastic surgery, and reproductive violence (Mutu and Firstenberg 2003). Mutu's and Akunyili Crosby's response is therefore to create new figures – new figurations (Haraway 1997) – of black female empowerment through different but complementary strategies, drawing on, playing with, and in some ways contesting Western art traditions (Akunyili Crosby 2016b; White 2018).¹



Image 2. Wangechi Mutu, *Me Carry My Head on My Home on My Head*, 2005. Acrylic, brush and ink, collage, and sequins on plastic. 87 9/16 × 52 in. Installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, May 2016. Photo credit: JR P, 2016.

For Akunyili Crosby, this process of refiguring entails expanding the visual grammars used to represent Nigerian subjects. This includes layering “Western” traditional portraiture and still-life techniques (as a comment on colonialism) (Akunyili Crosby [2016a](#)) with ready-made imagery drawn from her Nigerian and US American everyday experiences, both intimate and popular, to produce scenes of mundane and contented family life. Akunyili Crosby, however, also frequently centers her imagery on the female figure, placing her in positions that are on top of, enveloping, over, and more visible than her (white) male figures ([Image 3](#)). In the process, she constitutes new (re)presentations of powerful female figures (Zelt [2018](#)).

For Mutu, this political project centers on the production of two contrasting feminine figures: the grotesque and the “afro-futuristic.” In her earlier works, Mutu’s figures are constructed through the literal and figurative deconstruction and reconstruction of images taken from pornography, fashion magazines, and scientific medical guidebooks. The effect is the creation of a series of images that reflect the racialized violences of war and body modifications that are frequently reproduced within international gendered and racial discourses: a “racial grotesque” (Papenburg [2012](#)). Her more recent work, however, centers around the creation of new hybridized female afro-futurist figures. According to the artist, “There’s this constant movement towards historicising Africa, turning it into this archaic place. ... Part of my challenge ... is to envision, not so much blackness as a race, but the existence of African elements in culture in the future and how is that possible” (Saatchi Gallery, [no date](#)).



Image 3. Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Garden, Thriving*, 2016. Acrylic, transfers, color pencil, and collage on paper. Diptych: each 213.4 x 274.3 cm (84 x 108 in). © Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice.

Across their work, Mutu and Akunyili Crosby therefore refuse to center whiteness, a passive femininity, and heteronormative sexuality in a particular way. What struck me about their work in particular, however, is that for both artists the challenge goes beyond (re)presentation of these figures through presence. The violence they seek to redress is too complex, runs deeper, on multiple scales (geographic, historic, and social), and across intersecting structures of power to address solely through a refiguring. For this reason, the mediums and techniques used are a central part of their artistic response.

Layered wanderings

The way in which Mutu and Akunyili Crosby respond to these erasures and violences is by working extensively and intentionally with collage. As an art form and compositional strategy, collage has a long history of challenging the status quo: as a “traditional” women’s and folk art practice (Schapiro and Meyer [1977](#)), through its uptake within the modern art movements of the early twentieth century (Waldman [1992](#)), and as a form to challenge gendered and sexual logics. In particular, as Kangas et al. ([2018](#), 4) have argued, collage operates through a queer epistemology: it disrupts existing orders, including international ones, by “smashing” them and bringing their pieces together. Collage therefore offers a different “non-Newtonian” cosmology (Edkins [2003](#)) that can highlight contingency, multiplicity, and uncertainty in the process. Or, as Sarah Jane Cervenak argues, there is an “insistent multiplicity at the heart of the collagic form” ([2016](#), 393). Drawing together fragments of different source materials, often from everyday experiences, and reassembling them to make their figures out of jarring contrasts (pornography with medical text illustrations, or glossy magazine images of celebrities with family photographs), Mutu and Akunyili Crosby therefore make cuts into existing texts and embed disjuncture and contrasts into their practice. In doing so, they sit within a longer history of collage, but with the important contribution of thinking through the gendered, racialized, and decolonial implications of their practices.

It is, however, not only the cuts and moments of disruption, reassembly, and strong juxtapositions that form the queer epistemology and cosmology of their collage work, but the layering of texts, their complexity, and in particular the acts of partial revealing and intentional withholding of details that do important political work. For these artists, “collage techniques [function] as a kind of refusal to answer” (Cervenak [2016](#), 393) based in part on layered understandings of knowledge making that pay greater attention to gendered and racialized ways of knowing (Van Veeren [2018](#)).

In Akunyili Crosby’s work, for example, viewers are encouraged, rewarded, and frustrated by the physical and mental need to take a closer look. Viewed much more closely, her works contain an additional layer of fine detail and therefore critique. More specifically, making up the bodies and objects in her images are the complex and careful interweaving of a multitude of image transfers and collage from Nigerian and US American magazines, from family photographs and home textiles. In many of her images, for example, skin shading is the surface onto which images that comment on race are layered. Her works therefore function “trojan [horse]-like” to deliver new meanings and challenge initial readings (Victoria Miro, [no date](#)). They are therefore queered figures in a second sense for the ways in which they trouble bodies as carriers of meaning. The critical moments engendered by her work are therefore produced not only through the use of “everyday” objects (dining rooms and bedrooms) and materials (magazine imagery, family photographs), different cultural contexts and times (Nigeria and the US across the decades), and their multiple jumps and juxtapositions within the collages that make up the figures, but also through her technique of a multitude of transfers and layering that creates an explosion of images and challenges the “normal.” Most importantly, the work is also rendered illegible: some of the transfers are placed sideways or too high to see, while others are faded to illegibility, a feature of the transfer technique. These layers are therefore intended to be easy to see but difficult to read. Some are read quickly and some not at all, depending on the viewer’s physical and cultural position. Readings favor those who, like Akunyili Crosby, have a common experience of boundary crossing (Zelt [2018](#)) and reward those who explore their detail, but nevertheless continue to frustrate the viewer.

Akunyili Crosby’s collage work, like that of Mutu, therefore produces an aesthetic and ethical experience of critical “wandering” and “wondering” through the layers of composition. The lack of clarity through the cutting and layering of images as well as through the process of transfers produces a fading and blurring that is a direct comment on ignorances, epistemic erasures, and violence. These fadings work with the jumps, cuts, dislocations, and juxtapositions to refuse easy clarity and recognize complexity and the blurry borders that make their subjectivities. For Cervenak, what this collagic form therefore makes possible is a “recovery of [a] right to dis/assemble, to undo, and work through ... where wandering is an undisclosed epistemological opening” ([2016](#), 397). In *See Through*, for example, Akunyili Crosby plays with the idea of openings into different spaces, through layers of images within her still life ([Image 4](#)). For Akunyili Crosby, this is an encouragement and enticement for viewers to make a journey through the layers and to make shifts historically, geographically, and across different visual languages.



Image 4. Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *See Through*, 2016. Acrylic, transfers, color pencil, charcoal, collage, and commemorative fabric on paper. 155.4 x 132 cm (61 1/4 x 52 in). © Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice.

By doing so, Akunyili Crosby pushes at the borders and boundaries of what and where “African-ness” and gender are (Selasi [2005](#); Akunyili Crosby [2016b](#); Zelt [2018](#)). These multidirectional and layered viewings are such that a “complete” reading is explicitly impossible. Instead, viewers must wander and wonder through these texts.

My encounters with the collages of Mutu and Akunyili Crosby and their commentary on the (international) racial, sexual, and gendered politics of war, colonialism, and violence are an inspiration to recenter an ethics of wandering within critical international relations. For Jayna Brown ([2008](#)), Denise Ferreira da Silva ([2014](#)), and Cervenak ([2014](#), 5), wanderings are necessary physical, intellectual, social, and, importantly, political practices. Wanderings therefore bear a close relationship to queer, critical race, postcolonial, and feminist approaches: for playful “world-

travelling” (Lugones [1987](#)) and inviting encounters with “multiple worlds” (Agathangelou and Ling [2009](#)); for “methodologies of mess” “to imagine what method – and its politics – might be if it were not caught in an obsession with clarity, with specificity, and with the definite” (Law [2003](#)); for failure, disruption, and surprise (Halberstam [2011](#); Lisle [2018](#)); for “epistemic compassion” based on epistemologies that open up borders by dissolving binaries (Ling [2019](#)); for attending to the power of ignorance that molds knowledge around it (Sedgwick [1990](#)); for staying “with the trouble” of “tenticular” (or complex) interconnections (Haraway [2016](#)); and for working “against mastery” (Singh [2018](#)). Wandering – world-travelling or “walking while asking questions” (Grosfoguel [2012](#)) – is an ethics of “opening up other ways of knowing and doing” (da Silva [2014](#), 81) that fit comfortably with the critical cosmology of embracing uncertainty and undecidedness. Wandering entails a welcoming of ramblings and daydreaming, of desire, and of the unexpected, unfocused, and unstructured. It is an ethos that seeks to decenter agency and intention and, most importantly, to resist enclosures and complete legibility, understanding illegibility as part of knowledge making and meaning making.

Conclusions

International politics as a discipline has increasingly recognized art, design, and popular culture as a force for shaping actions and meaning. Though not always the case, art spaces and art objects include practices of meaning making that can be disruptive and offer different and more critical epistemologies. Paying attention to these art practices in the form of their techniques and mediums offers new ways to encounter and consider how political meaning is produced. This includes studying the artistic practices and techniques in/of the peripheries – whether peripheries in space, subject matter, or even technique.

The work of Mutu and Akunyili Crosby reflects a “queer epistemology” that encourages not only a “smashing” of boundaries (Kangas et al. [2018](#)) but also a visual and intellectual wandering and wondering that is an important part of feminist and decolonial curiosity. This wandering works well to push the boundaries of popular misrepresentations of where and what identities are, especially those that misrepresent and reproduce epistemic violence in the form of erasures, misrecognitions, simplifications, and fixedness that remain at the heart of too much of international relations. Using collaging techniques, however, entails more than cuts and contrasts that produce new figures. It is a process of producing encounters that are more attuned to the layers of cultural and historical violence and their illegibilities. This includes techniques and practices that reflect the uncertain, the hidden, and the fading. As Akunyili Crosby ([2018](#)) states about her work, “I want to place viewers in this transitional space so they begin to exist in a world that expands beyond their periphery.” Critical international relations, including feminist approaches, might therefore continue to explore ways in which boundaries and boundary making can be disrupted, continuing to embrace more diverse sets of wandering and wondering.

Note

1. As much as it can be argued that these artists work through queer epistemologies, there are important queer critiques of both Akunyili Crosby’s and Mutu’s work: Akunyili Crosby often reproduces heteronormative relations of power even while she presents more sex-positive imagery; Mutu has been interpreted as reproducing discourses of “sex negativity” (Hernandez [2017](#)).

Acknowledgment

My thanks to Catherine Baker, Egle Cesnulyte, Debbie Lisle, and the Conversations Editors Natália Maria Félix de Souza and Catia C. Confortini for helpful comments and suggestions in connection with this project.

Funding

This work was supported by Brigstow Institute, University of Bristol (Seedcorn Funding Scheme, 2018).

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